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TAGS: PREL PGOV EPET ENRG TU TX

SUBJECT: TURKEY/TURKMENISTAN: BILATERAL TIES INCH AHEAD ON  
BERDIMUHAMEDOV VISIT

REF: A. ASHGABAT 388

1B. ANKARA 504

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner, reasons 1.4 b, d

11. (C) SUMMARY. Despite media reports to the contrary, Turkmen President Berdimuhamedov discussed energy matters in some detail with President Gul and PM Erdogan during his March 24-25 visit to Turkey, MFA Central Asia Department Head Sule Gurel and Energy Department Head Berris Ekinci told us April 2. Turkmenistan is reportedly prepared to sell natural gas to Turkey via yet-to-be-built connections between Caspian offshore platforms in Turkmen and Azeri waters.

Berdimuhamedov is reportedly open to Gul playing a facilitative role between the Turkmen and Azerbaijani leaders, but told Gul he wants a bilateral with Azerbaijani President Aliyev first. The Turks believe Berdimuhamedov came away from the visit with a greater appreciation for the importance of diversifying Turkmenistan's energy dealings. The Turks did not, however, get a positive signal on Turkmen participation in the Turkic summit. The Turks are nonetheless committed to keeping up the momentum -- however cautious -- in Turkish-Turkmen relations, as well as throughout the Central Asia region; President Gul is prepared to return to Ashgabat before the end of the year, is finalizing dates for visits to Dushanbe and Bishkek, and is hoping for an invitation to Tashkent or a visit to Ankara from Uzbek President Karimov. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Gurel emphasized the importance of Berdimuhamedov's "reciprocal" visit to Turkey. A Turkmen leader had not called on Ankara since 1998 (when the Trans-Caspian pipeline was under consideration, Ekinci joked). In addition to a joint communique, the two sides signed an economic and commercial cooperation agreement, an agreement establishing regular Foreign Ministry political consultations, and a protocol on cooperation between the two countries' state broadcasters, TRT and TNT. Berdimuhamedov was pleased, she said, with the cultural program in Istanbul, to which he had attached great importance. (Large Turkish and Turkmen flags had to stand-in for the huge presidential portraits the Turkmen side had requested.) Even as Berdimuhamedov's meetings with Gul and Erdogan were lengthy and substantive, a number of agenda items had to be canceled at the last minute, Gurel observed. She noted that one of her Turkmen colleagues told her Berdimuhamedov had a "leg problem" and "did not want to move around too much."

ENERGY: OFF THE AGENDA, ON FOR DISCUSSION

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¶3. (C) As reported by Embassy Ashgabat (ref A), the Turks had been concerned that energy would be completely off the Berdimuhamedov agenda when they were informed that Turkmen Deputy PM for Oil and Gas Tagiyev would not accompany the President on his visit. With the Turkmen president having already backed out of a proposed Turkey-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan trilateral energy meeting in Antalya, the Turks already had low expectations on energy, but were pleased with the level of detail with which the two sides discussed energy issues, namely: Turkmenistan natural gas sales to Turkey via the Caspian by linking Azerbaijani and Turkmen offshore production platforms and Nabucco. Berdimuhamedov reportedly told Gul that an alternative, Iranian route was problematic due to Iran's unreliability as a partner. Gul stressed the importance of alternative outlets for Turkmen gas for energy security and economic gain to Berdimuhamedov, according to Ekinci. Gul reportedly told him Turkmenistan's consideration of sending gas westward, perhaps through Nabucco participation, had already allowed the Turkmen to command a higher price in negotiations with Russia, China and Iran. Ekinci believed Berdimuhamedov came away from the visit with a better understanding of the importance of diversifying Turkmenistan's natural gas sales.

¶4. (C) Gul raised the Turkey-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan trilateral, according to Gurel. Berdimuhamedov was reportedly positive, but first wanted a bilateral meeting with Azerbaijani President Aliyev. Who visits whom remains stuck on protocol: length of service versus age. Gul, who set aside protocol by visiting Turkmenistan in December 2007

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(Turkey had been due a bilateral visit from Turkmenistan), urged the Turkmen president to try to be flexible, saying there should not be such issues between brotherly countries.

¶5. (C) Despite engaging in "satisfactory" energy discussions, the Turkmen side, according to Gurel, determinedly sought to omit any reference to energy in the joint communique. The Turks tried to insert the same energy cooperation language the two sides had agreed to in the communique during Gul's December visit, but the Turkmen rejected this approach. In the end, the word "energy" appeared in the communique only as a part of the broader scope of bilateral cooperation: "Both parties assessed cooperation in all fields, among them energy."

TURKS PRESS AHEAD ON REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT

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¶6. (C) The Turkmen did not endorse Turkey's call for a Turkic summit, with a permanent secretariat. Gul reportedly received no answer from Berdimuhamedov when he expressed his wish to see him at the next summit in Baku, in June. Turkey continues to attach great importance to the summit (ref B) and to bolstering Turkish ties in the region. According to Gurel, Gul has not yet received an invitation to visit Uzbek President Karimov, and the invitation for Karimov to visit Turkey still stands. Gurel described as positive the Turkey-Uzbekistan Joint Economic Commission meeting held the previous week in Ankara, attended by Uzbek First Deputy Minister Najimov. She noted that Turkey is keenly interested in any U.S. steps to revitalize political and military relations with Tashkent. The Tajiks and Kyrgyz leaders have invited Gul to visit Dushanbe and Bishkek; the dates are being finalized. Gurel also noted that Gul wants to maintain the momentum in Turkish-Turkmen relations and is prepared to return to Turkmenistan before the end of the year.

WILSON